

# A closer look at 'hilot'

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## A Filipino healing tradition

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MASSAGE is the perhaps the oldest form of therapy known to man, and in the Philippines it maintains a long and rich tradition. The Filipino art of bone setting and therapeutic massage was known by various name: hilot (Tagalog, Visayan, Bicolano, Manobo, Dumagat), hagud (Bukidnon), aplos (Bontoc) and ablon (Northern Ilocano) to name a few. Its practitioners known as manghihilot, mammulo and partera were a common sight throughout the archipelago.

### Modality

Like any therapeutic tradition, Filipino hilot has its own unique healing modality. The foundation of Filipino hilot is more or less based on the concept of physical and spiritual channels latent in the human body. So long as energy and other bodily fluids flow freely through these conduits, the body is in optimum health. Thus, the most common diagnosis one will hear from practitioners of hilot is "May baradong ugat [A vein was clogged]."

It is interesting to note that the concept of energy meridians was present in the healing arts of other Asian countries as well. In his definitive article on hilot entitled "Healing Arts of the Philippines," published in the Rapid Journal Vol. 5 No.3-4, Virgil J. Mayor Apostol, an ayurvedic therapist at the Chopra Center for Well Being in the United States and perhaps the most authoritative practitioner of traditional hilot today, relates that the urat and penna (energy principles of hilot), has obvious parallels in the Ayurvedic and yogic traditions of India. Apostol explains that in the said healing arts, it was believed that nadis, or channels, that carry prana, or life force energy, exist throughout the body.

### Common categories

Hilot is one of the three main branches of Philippine healing tradition. Filipino folk healers were generally categorized into three divisions—the manghihilot (masseurs and bonesettes), the albolaryo (healing repertoire consists of herb tinctures, prayers and rituals) and the kumadrona or partera (midwife). The Philippines healing tradition has a strong resemblance to curanderismo or folk medicine of Mexico, another nation that was subjected to Spanish rule for centuries. Like their Philippine counterparts, Mexican curanderos or healers come in the three types: The yerbero (herbalist), the sobador (masseur) partera (midwife).

### Scientific rationale

The resurgence of interest in mind-body medicine in the last few decades has brought a lot of alternative methods of healing under scientific scrutiny. Some have passed, others failed. Though it cannot be denied that hilot has its metaphysical side and it will take some more time before it can be totally quantified scientifically, a number of its practices have a sound medical rationale. Massage

for instance, on the most basic level, can abate the fear and anxiety of the patient. Physiologically, it can slow down the release of stress hormone cortisol and increase the body's production of another hormone, serotonin, which can improve and boost immunity.

An additional scientific healing factor that must be considered is the healer's personality. There are healers whose power of charisma is bordering on the miraculous that they can make you feel well just by knowing them. Not surprisingly, there were practitioners of hilot who admits that at times, they also harness the potential of the placebo effect in healing their patients.

### **Prudence**

A possible clash between a patient's religious beliefs and the principles or foundation of a particular alternative healing method must be put into consideration when opting to employ a particular therapy. The occult, reverence to nature spirits and mysticism were part and parcel of the majority of systems of hilot.

Even in the absence of professional and regulating standards regarding the practice of hilot today, potential patients can protect themselves from harm by using common sense. Among the factors to be considered when consulting a particular healer are hygiene, gender sensitivity and the practitioner's reputation. Be wary of healers who claim to have all the answers. Any healing modality, Filipino or otherwise has its limitation and it is good to learn that despite its mystical nature, many practitioners of hilot today are to open a collaboration with doctors of conventional medicine.

Hilot is a gem of Filipino heritage. With responsible research, its potential can be realized as an effective alternative therapy that many Filipinos can benefit from.

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